

Remember the name Judy Strick. She is a riveting teller of tales. "Kingdom Come Ca" is a seductive and compelling journey into magical realism.

Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey  
Author of "A Woman of Independent Means"



# Kingdom Come, CA

JUDY STRICK

"Touching magical and haunting, a story about the wounds we futilely try and hide, and all the ways they climb back to the surface."

J. Barton Mitchell  
Author of "Conquered Earth Series"

# KINGDOM COME, CA.

A NOVEL

BY

JUDY STRICK

What wish could have been so important, that the very making of it would wind up destroying my family?

And now I can't even remember what I had wanted so much on that lovely afternoon by the sea, the last afternoon of my childhood.

CHAPTER ONE: APRIL 18, 1978 - SANTA MONICA CA.

Let's go back thirty-four years, to a balmy spring day, sunny and warm, with just enough breeze to ruffle the palm trees along the palisades.

We Wellmans, four of us then, had gone to the Ocean Park pier on the occasion of my eighth birthday. I had picked the pier instead of Sea World or Knotts Berry Farm, my other choices. The decision had been prompted by a third grade urban myth making the rounds on the playground: The Ferris wheel in Santa Monica was said to have magical powers, and from the top of the ride you could see all the way to China. And if you held your breath and made a wish at that very moment, your wish would come true. I was enchanted by the idea. Eight year olds still believe in magic.

And so I chose the pier.

I'll never stop ruing my choice. If only I had wanted to see Shamu jump through a hoop, or longed to ride on the rollercoaster at Knotts Berry Farm, if only I had not wanted to make a wish.

If only I had never been conceived

There are several pictures of that day, taken by a strolling photographer in a clown suit: a group shot, all of us squinting into the sun: Adele and David in their tie-dye and denim and their two adorable kids. And a solo shot of yours truly, Ruby Louise, mugging it up for the camera. I'm wearing seersucker shorts and a t-shirt with big red letters-

'Birthday Girl'. A red helium balloon is tugging at my wrist and I'm grinning a big loopy grin. My new teeth are too big for my face and my curly hair is blowing and I look like a chrysanthemum.

In that photo my brother was not the center of the photos, or for that matter, of the day. My brother was very cute. He was only five. All five year olds are cute. Not so eight year olds with bony knees and big teeth, but it was my day. I was the one getting all the attention, and I loved it: hot dogs and candy apples, cheap plastic prizes my father won for me at coin tosses and dart games, breaking waves and cawing seagulls making background music, and the calliope playing mechanical Strauss waltzes.

And then it was time for the big event- the Ferris wheel, where dreams came true.

We waited in line, hand in hand, my father and I, while my mother, her big halo of wiry curls, waited with my brother behind the ropes at the entrance to the ride. Abe was crying; he wanted to go on too. "No way," my mother had said. A squirmy kid like you, you'll fall off and kill yourself."

So it was just my Daddy and me; much to my delight. I was nuts about him. He was tall, and cool for a father, with his long hair and his Frank Zappa t-shirt, He squeezed my hand and winked at me. I was excited and a bit scared; looking from down there, at terra firma, the top of the ride seemed very high up.

It was finally our turn and a shiny red gondola arrived. My father helped me aboard and bowed. I

giggled, charmed and embarrassed. A chrome bar was locked in place to hold us in. The brake was released with a loud clunk, and we floated slowly up into the air. I clutched the bar, at first a little nervous, and then I surrendered to the whole experience, drifting u-u-u-u-up, our car swaying each time we stopped to take on passengers, honky-tonk sounds floating by like bright confetti. My Daddy and me- no snotty little kid to suck up the attention.

And I looked around. The sounds from below were more muted, blended, like a hum. The whole of Santa Monica bay and the curve of the beach stretched like a diorama up and down the coast; tiny toy sailboats dotted the water, and the horizon line, a million miles away, faded into the sky. I was bursting with happiness and the total rightness of my life at that very moment.

Then the Ferris wheel clunked to a stop, and we were at the very top. And in the distance, at the end of the horizon, I saw land. The red gondola swayed back and forth, then stopped moving and we hung suspended in air.

"Look Daddy, there's China."

I closed my eyes, and made my wish, crossing all my fingers and concentrating.

"What did you wish for?" my father asked.

"It's a secret."

And so it remains, to this very day, even to myself. I have no idea if my wish came true.

But I do remember that when I opened my eyes at the top of the world on that lovely April afternoon and looked around, I was so filled with the sheer joy of existence that I leaped to my feet, threw my arms in the air and shouted at the top of my lungs, "WE'RE BIRDS". And I flapped my arms as if I were flying, and my exuberance set our little gondola rocking back and forth crazily at the top of the enormous wheel and I clutched at the bar terrified that I would fall out and splatter on the pavement below.

Then a bullhorn shouted out for the world to hear, "HEY KID! DOWN ON TOP!"

Humiliated beyond words, as only an eight year old can feel, my cheeks burned with embarrassment as my father grabbed my arm and pulled me down.

"Take it easy, birthday girl; it's a long way down. And by the way, that was Catalina, not China."

And I looked down and we were so high up that the people below looked like tiny Weeble dolls, and I got dizzy and my stomach turned.

I white-knuckled it all the way down, clutching at the chrome bar, sitting very still, feet pressed together, arms at my side.

As soon as we hit bottom, I leaped out of the car, glad to be alive. My mother stood at the exit, holding my brother's hand. Abe was eating an ice cream cone and smiling happily. I ran over and gave him a hug. He blinked in surprise. The hug was very out of character for me, at least with him.

The breeze smelled like salt and tar and cotton candy.

And then we went on the bumper cars, and after that my father won me a pink plush teddy bear on the ring toss.

My world, lost for a teddy bear. For the five minutes it took to win the damn thing.

It happened on the way home, as we pulled off the pier, onto Ocean Avenue. My father was driving the new car, a red Chevy Malibu station wagon that still had a "new car" smell. I was sitting behind him. My mother was up front and my brother was behind her, in the seat beside me. He'd pitched a fit when my mother wanted to fasten him in the safety belt. "It makes me throw up," he'd shouted, kicking his feet, and pounding his fists against the seat back.

She finally gave in. "Okay; this time only. You damn well better not fall out the window."

"Well for Christ sake Adele, roll up the goddamn window if you're so worried," my father grouched. This was our first car with safety belts. Nobody was used to them.

"Put your seat belts on, the rest of you people," my mother had said with mounting irritation.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," my father grumbled, ignoring her.

"You too young lady," she said to me sharply-not at all my idea of the way you talked to a birthday girl.

I grudgingly did as I was told, and the minute she turned around I unfastened my buckle and stuck my tongue out at her back.

Abe was still crying as we pulled out of the parking lot.

"I want the window open," he was wailing. Five year olds, they drive you crazy sometimes.

The car bumped along the wooden planks of the pier, until we hit asphalt near the top of the ramp. That was when I accidentally let go of my red balloon, which floated away from me, in front of my father's face.

I don't think, even if I had held onto the balloon, that my father could have done anything to avoid the speeding black Pinto that had run the red light as we were pulling onto Ocean Avenue, into the intersection.

I remember nothing of the accident; I didn't hear the explosion, don't remember the fire. The last thing I can recall is reaching for the string on my red balloon.

My brother Abe died in the crash. He was thrown from the car, and broke his neck. The driver of the Pinto died too. His car burst into flames; the gas tank had exploded.



I was burned in the subsequent inferno. My father suffered major injuries, my mother walked away unscathed.

The entire Wellman family died that day; but some of us continued existing. All families deal with disaster in their own way I suppose. We Wellmans dealt with it badly. We never quite got all our mourning over with; we could not face the pain. Instead we tried our damnest to wipe out the past. We cut ourselves off from the friends we had known when there were four of us, and passed ourselves off as a family of three. When the subject came up, I told people that I was an only child. My parents did too. We never mentioned my brother; we had an unspoken pact. And still do, to this very day. What's done cannot be undone. End of story.

It was not my fault that my brother died and I lived. Thirty-four years later I must remind myself of that. I could not have known what would happen when I chose the Santa Monica Pier; I could not have helped it when my red balloon flew into my father's face. I was not responsible.

Doesn't matter - the guilt will be with me, deep in the recesses of my memory, until the day I die; like my scars and my throbbing shoulder.

And the unusual way I have chosen to live my life.